# Shadowy World of Police Informers

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The Communist who recants, the Klansman sickened by excess, the crook trying to bargain his way out of a jail sentence—all are cogs in a shadowy but highly important part of the criminal detection process known as the informer system.

Sara Jane Moore also was part of the system. And, now that the part-time informer for the FBI has been charged with trying to shoot President Ford, questions inevitably are being asked about how law enforcement agencies recruit and use informers.

Judged by what has come to light about her history, Moore seems an unstable person—a woman whose personal relationships were disrupted by violent outbursts of temper, who indulged a love of intrigue by using diffreent identities and who sought publicity and acceptance by trying to involve herself in radical politics.

What, the public is likely to demand, does such a record say about the wisdom and morality of relying on such individuals to provide the FBI and police with secret information?

It is not a question that law enforcement officials find easy to answer. But, although they are reluctant to discuss details, federal and local police sources are unanimous in insisting that the informer system, however unsavory it might appear, is the single most important weapon they possess to combat crime and subversion.

The plain truth, these sources say, is that most crimes are solved not by detective-fiction flashes of deduction or by the sophisticated analyses of scientific crime laboratories.

Instead, each year, police agencies all over the world make thousands of arrests and recover millions of dollars in stolen property primarily by pursuing leads fed to them by informers.

This truth, the sources say, is unchanged by the fact that a high percentage of informers are criminals or outcasts or social misfits. As one FBI agent put it, "They're not exactly what you'd call the cream of society. But remember that you can't get inside information on crime from the preacher at your neighborhood church."

So widespread is the reliance on informers that the FBI and other federal agencies are generally thought to employ two informats for each full-time agent. If so, that would mean that the two Cabinet agencies most heavily involved in fighting crime, Justice and Treasury, have approximately 30,000 informers on their payrolls.

Homer Boynton,, a spokesman for the FBI, refused yesterday to discuss the number of bureau informers or other details of the program. To do so, he said, would strike at "the very heart of our operations."

Boynton did admit that the FBI

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spent $3.8 million on its informer program during the 1975 fiscal year. He also said, "We keep a whole manual on informants that covers such questions as how to recruit them, how to handle them, how to pay them."

Elsewhere in the federal government, a reliance on informers, although not so extensive, is nevertheless widespread. The Internal Revenue Service uses them to uncover tax dodgers, the Agriculture Department to identify grocers who accept government food stamps for cigarettes, beer and other improper items, thee Interior Department to nab game poachers on federal reservations.

Sources in several police departments across the country yesterday said they would find it next to impossible to carry out their duties if they did not have a steady stream of tips coming in from informers.

Most of the sources cited landmark cases in the history of American crime that were broken by the informer system. For example, the incident that made the FBI a nationally celebrated institution—the 1934 shooting down of desperado John Dillinger in front of a Chicago movie theater — resulted from information given to the bureau by one of Dillinger's women friends, the famous "lady in red."

Similarly, what were probably the two biggest insights gained by police and public into the workings of organized crime were provided by informers: the testimony in 1940 of Abe (Kid Twist) Reles about the Brooklyn enforcement gang known as Murder, Inc., and the talking done by Joe Valachi in 1963 about life in the Mafia.

Despite their importance to law enforcement, informers are regarded with scorn and loathing in all languages. In the United States, with its traditional mistrust of spying and prying, the public—and the police—have long been inclined to accept the underworld's characterization of informers as squealers, finks, rats, snitchers and stool pigeons.

This idea has been reinforced in literature. In such works as Liam O'Flaherty's "The Informer" and Arthur Miller's "The View from the Bridge," informing, for whatever reasons, has been portrayed as so morally reprehensible that it can be expiated only through death.

Even Joe Valchi, who spoke without visible regret of the murders in which he had been involved, brooded in his unpublished memoirs about his informing against Mafia boss Vito Genovese. "Now Vito got to find out that he caused me to do what I am doing. I'm being a rat the way he wanted me to die, branded as a rat."

What then causes a person to become an informer in the face of such attitudes? Police sources say there are several reasons, ranging from a desire to pay off a grudge against a real or fancied enemy to a lust for involvement, however peripheral, in intrigue and headline-catching events.

Most informers are people who are vulnerable to pressure from the police: drug addicts, homosexuals, prostitutes, petty crooks who have been caught in the act and who hope to escape prosecution, and other criminals desirous of eliminating business rivals.

Several police sources regard women as potentially the best informers. Women, they explain, usually are more attentive to detail than men and can give better descriptions of people and events that they have observed only briefly.

In addition, these sources say women tend to be more vindictive than men and quicker to seek revenge when they feel they have been wronged. They cite the "women in red" of the Dillinger case.

Her name was Anna Sage, and she was a bordello madame. According to FBI accounts, she became an informer partly because federal agents threatened her with deportation to her native Romania and partly because she was jealous of the attention paid by Dillinger to a younger prostitute.

Given the varied backgrounds and motivations of informers, it is not surprising that their ranks are studded with what one FBI agent calls "kooks." But, police sources quickly add, the fact that a person may be unstable and even unreliable does not destroy his or her potential value as an informer.

The only valid test of an informer is the quality and quantity of the information, they say. In this respect, Sara Jane Moore, arrested Monday in San Francisco and charged with firing a pistol at Mr. Ford, seems to have been only a probationary informer.

Although she had passed information on radical groups to the authorities for a year, she was referred to in FBI parlance as a "potential informant"—a term meaning that the reliability of her information had not been established. Still, the FBI dealt with her and paid her.

As Boynton said yesterday: "Of course, we take into account such factors as mental instability or illness in dealing with an informant. We also have to consider the type of information that would be available and the circumstances of each case. But just because a psychiatrist might say someone is a bit cuckoo doesn't mean that if he gives—and it checks out—we should turn it down."